

FOUR UNPUBLISHED POEMS BY
YOSEF BEN-YISRA²EL
A SIXTEENTH CENTURY JEWISH
YEMENITE POET*

by

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The following four poems bear the name of Yosef-ben Yisrā²el spelled out in acrostics at the beginning of each of the poem's stanzas.¹ These as yet unpublished poems are in the possession of my good friend, Yosef Tobi of Jerusalem, Israel, who graciously granted me permission to research and publish them—a fact for which I am very thankful.

Little is known about the life of Ben-Yisrā²el. His exact time, and even place of birth cannot be definitely determined. His son was the famous scribe, Yisrā²el Safra ben-Yosef,² whose death was lamented by Shalom Shabazi (born in 1619, died after 1680)³ in a poem of his, *Ya 'Ein ma balek šajiyya* (*Ḥapeš Ḥayyim*, pp. 362–363). From this poem and from the dates provided in two manuscripts copied by this son,⁴ we may reasonably infer that the poet Yosef ben-Yisrā²el lived in the second half of the sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth, in Šar^cab, in the southern part of Yemen. Thus ben-Yisrā²el was evidently the older contemporary of Shabazi.

Traditions current among Yemenite Jews persistently hold that our poet was the father of Shabazi; they point to the fact that both poets carry the nickname Mašta.⁵ It has, however, been determined that

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1. Three of the poems spell out only the name Yosef. But since they were found in a collection of poems, some of which (like our first poem) spell the author's name in full, we may safely attribute all these poems to him.

2. See Tobi (1974, p. 15).

3. See Ahroni (1986, pp. 89–99).

4. a) a book consisting of *Hapīrōt*, copied in 1608, and b) a *ṭiklal*, copied in 1622.

5. See, among others, Se^cadiah Mansura, *Ḥapeš Ḥayyim*, p. 9; Amram Qorah (*Ibid*, p. 336).

although both poets may have been related in some manner, they were not father and son.⁶

Thus far, some eighty poems and *piyyûṭîm* (liturgical hymns) from the pen of ben-Yisrāʿel are extant. Most of these are still unpublished, scattered in diverse collections of Yemenite manuscripts. Some of ben-Yisrāʿel's poems, our four poems included, are written in Hebrew; others are written in Arabic, with Hebrew characters; still others are in alternating verses of Hebrew and Arabic, or in Hebrew interspersed with Arabic phrases and words. Ben-Yisrāʿel is known to have written secular poetry also, consisting mainly of riddles,⁷ and poems which deal with philosophical themes.⁸

The tenor of Ben-Yisrāʿel's lyrics is predominantly nationalistic, permeated by a profound religious consciousness, a fact which is characteristic of almost all Yemenite Jewish poetry. Ben-Yisrāʿel's *piyyûṭîm*, like those of others, revolve mainly around the themes of *gālūt* (exile) and *gēʿullā* (salvation). While the echo of generations of suffering reverberates through them, they are highly charged with exuberant eschatological messages. Great resonances of the biblical past, particularly that of the Exodus, resound vividly in them. With the strong conviction that the Bible presages the panorama of the future, they paint a graphic, indeed hyperbolic picturization of the glorious future that awaited the now down trodden Jewish brethren. Miracles will be enacted as in times of old; the poet exuberantly anticipates the coming of the Messiah, whose advent will culminate in the restoration of the Jews and the enthronement of King David. Thus a very pointed contrast is drawn between the gloomy present and the glorious future, and a cheerful, hopeful note rings throughout the poems.

Ben-Yisrāʿel's Hebrew poems, as characteristic of medieval poetry, are lavishly studded with verses drawn from diverse strata of Jewish literary creativity, particularly the Bible, the verses of which serve as vehicles of both the poet's and the reader's thoughts and feelings.⁹

Ben-Yisrāʿel is one of the most prominent poets ever produced by Yemenite Jewry. It is widely held that he and his predecessor Zecharia al-Dhahri (ca. 1516–ca. 1581) laid the ground, both in form and content,

6. Tobi (1973, pp. 63–72) convincingly argues that Shabazi's father was Yosef ben-Abigad ben-Ḥalfon.

7. See, for example, Ratzaby (1967, pp. 56–60).

8. See Kafih (1963, pp. 4 and 10).

9. See Kozodoy (1977, pp. 117–126).

for the most celebrated Yemenite poet, Shalom Shabazi, with whom Yemenite poetry attained its highest pinnacle. Indeed, glimmerings of creative power are readily discernible in ben-Yisrā'el.¹⁰

Here are the four poems, edited, vocalized and annotated:

10. See Ahroni (1986, pp. 83–87).

I

פָּדָה בְּשָׁלוֹם נַפְשִׁי ⁸	יִשְׂאוּ הָרִים שְׁלוֹם ¹
וְהוֹצִיאָנִי הַפֶּשֶׁי ⁹	מֵאֵת אֶדְוִן הַשְּׁלוֹם
וּמַלְכוֹ הָעֶבֶר בְּרֹאשִׁי ¹⁰	אֲשֶׁר בְּמְרוֹמָיו שְׁלוֹם ²
אֲבִיעֵד שֶׁר שְׁלוֹם ¹¹	יִכְרֹךְ אֶת עַמּוֹ בְּשָׁלוֹם ³
בְּצָרִי עֲשֵׂה נִקְמוֹת	וּמְשִׁיחַ הַצֶּדֶק
וְהַשְׁבִּיתֵם מַאֲדָמוֹת	יְדִלְנוּ מֵעַמֶּק
בְּחֻזִּים וְעֲלָמוֹת	וַיִּחַזַּק הַבְּדָק ⁴
יִרְדָּפֵם יַעֲבוֹר שְׁלוֹם ¹²	וַיִּקְרָא לוֹ ה' שְׁלוֹם:
נִרְאָה מְקוֹם תַּפְאָרְתוֹ	סֵר יְגוֹן וְאַנְחָה ⁵
וּכְן לֹאִי וּמִשְׁמַרְתּוֹ	בְּכִנְיָן עֵיר הַמְּנוּחָה
בְּרִיתִי הִיטָה אֶתוֹ ¹³	וְאֵם הַבָּנִים שְׂמִיחָה ⁶
הַחַיִּים וְהַשְּׁלוֹם:	וְלִשְׁבַּע עַמִּי בְּנוֹה שְׁלוֹם ⁷

1. Taken from Ps 72:3, with the omission of the last word, the indirect object לעם "the people." The whole biblical verse reads: "Let the mountains bear peace for the people."

2. Based on Job 25:2, עֲשֵׂה שְׁלוֹם בְּמְרוֹמָיו, "Who brings about harmony in his heavens."

3. See Ps 29:11.

4. Ellipsis; omission of the genitive הַבֵּית. See 2 Kgs 12:6, 9, 13.

5. The poet substitutes the biblical plural נָסַר with the singular synonym סָר. See Isa 35:10 and 51:11.

6. See Ps 113:9.

7. See Isa 32:18.

8. See Ps 55:19.

9. Ellipsis. See Exod 21:5; the reference is to 'bondage' or 'exile,' namely "set me free from bondage."

10. An unintelligible verse. Perhaps one should read ומלכך, for ומלכו, "Let your King go over before me." Indeed, in the next verse, the poet refers to the Messiah: "Abi ad, the Prince of Peace."

11. See Isa 9:5.

12. See Isa 41:3, "He pursues them and passes on safely."

13. See Mal 2:5; see also Num 25:12.

לְמַדְנִי טוֹב טַעַם ²⁴	יִשְׁמַח יִצְחָק ¹⁴ וַיִּגַּל
לְהַבִּין בָּם בְּכָל פַּעַם	וְכָל זֶרַע יִשְׂרָאֵל
דְּרָכֶיהָ דְרָכֵי נֹעַם ²⁵	בְּעֵת יֵאמַר לוֹ הָאֵל
וְכָל נְתִיבוֹתֶיהָ שְׁלוֹם:	אֶת אַחִיד תִּפְקֹד לְשְׁלוֹם ¹⁵
יִצְחָק עוֹלָה וְזִכְחִים	שְׁמִתִּיד עַל בֵּיתִי
וְחִלּוֹת ²⁶ מִצּוֹת מְשׁוּחִים	סְגוּלָתִי וְנִחְלָתִי ¹⁶
וְכִהֵן מִקְרִיב נְתָחִים	מִלֹּד עַל עֵיר רִבְתִּי ¹⁷
הִנְנִי נֹתֵן לוֹ אֶת בְּרִיתִי שְׁלוֹם: ²⁷	וְקִרְאתָ אֵלֶיהָ לְשְׁלוֹם: ¹⁸
יִכְרֹךְ זֶרַע אֱמוּנָיו	רַחֲמֵתִי עַל עֲדָתְךָ
וַיִּשְׁקִיף צוּר מִמַּעוֹנָיו ²⁸	וְאָשִׁיב אֶת שְׁבוֹתֶךָ ¹⁹
יֵשָׁא ה' פָּנָיו	וְאֶכְרִית בֶּן אִמְתְּךָ ²⁰
אֵלֶיךָ וַיֵּשֶׁם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם: ²⁹	וַיִּשְׁמַתִּי פְקוּדֶתְךָ שְׁלוֹם: ²¹
תָּשִׁיב מִרְאָה וְחִזְיוֹן	אֶצְלָתִי מִרוּחִי ²²
וְשָׁכְנָה לְהֵר צִיּוֹן	עַל בֶּן דָּוִד מְשִׁיחִי
וּמִמְשָׁלָה וְאַפְרִיּוֹן	הַבּוֹנֶה בֵּית מְנוּחִי
וּשְׁנוֹת חַיִּים וְשְׁלוֹם: ³⁰	אֶתָּה שְׁלוֹם וּבֵיתְךָ שְׁלוֹם: ²³

14. In Jewish tradition, *Yinnon* is a symbolic name of the Messiah; see Ps 72:17.

15. See 1 Sam 17:8.

16. Reference to the People of Israel. See, for example, Exod 19:5; Ps 135:4 and Isa 19:25.

17. See Lam 1:1.

18. See Deut 20:10.

19. See Jer 33:26; Ezek 39:25.

20. Reference to Ishmael and his descendants; see Gen 16:1, 15 and 21:10.

21. See Isa 60:17.

22. See Num 11:17.

23. See 1 Sam 25:6.

24. See Ps 119:66.

25. See Prov 3:17.

26. Substitution of the synonym חִלּוֹת for the biblical רִיקִי. See Exod 29:12; Lev 2:4; Num 6:15.

27. See Num 25:12.

28. See Deut 26:15.

29. See Num 6:26.

30. See Prov 9:11.

II

לַעֲם דָּלִים וְעֲשׂוּקִים וּבְרִיתְךָ תָּקִים לְקַבֵּצָם מִמְּרַחֲקִים בְּאַהֲלֵי צַדִּיקִים: ²	יְמִינְךָ תוֹשִׁיעָה ¹ וְזָכוֹר נָא הַשְׁבוּעָה וּמִצִּיּוֹן הוֹפִיעָה קוֹל רָנָה וְיִשׁוּעָה
לְתוֹךְ יָמִים וּמִצּוּלוֹת ³ יְבָרְכֶךָ בְּמִקְהֵלוֹת ⁴ בְּשִׁיר נְעִים וּבְמַחֲלוֹת וְסוֹפֶת דָּוִד אָקִים: ⁵	נְעוֹנוֹתֶם הַשְּׁלֹךְ וּמִשִּׁיחֶךָ יִמְלוֹךְ בֵּת צִיּוֹן תִּגְי קוֹלֶךָ גְּאוּלְתְּךָ הַגִּיעָה
וְאֵל תִּפֹּן לְמַעַלְלָם בְּנֵה עִירָם וְהִיכֵלָם בְּיוֹם קִרְאָם שְׁמַע קוֹלָם ⁷ לְהִרְקֹדֶשׁ נְעֻמָּתִים:	סֶלַח נָא לְעוֹנוֹתֶם וּבְזָכוֹת יַעֲקֹב אִישׁ תָּם ⁶ וְאֵל תִּמָּאֵס בְּמִנְחָתָם וּבְיַד רוּעִים שְׁבָעָה ⁸
וַיָּבֹא לְצִיּוֹן גּוֹאֲלִי ⁹ מִנְחָם בֶּן עַמִּיאֵל ¹⁰ כִּי אֵין לָהֶם מִנְהַל ¹² וַתִּרְעִינָה בְּאַפִּיקִים: ¹⁴	פְּדוּת תִּשְׁלַח לַעֲם קְדוֹשׁ וּמִשִּׁיחֶךָ הַחַשׁ וּלְצֹאנְךָ הַדֶּרֶשׁ ¹¹ וְהַשְׁבֵּת תִּהְיֶה רָעָה ¹³

1. See Pss 60:7, 108:7, 138:7.

2. This whole verse is taken from Ps 118:15.

3. Based on Mic 7:19.

4. See Ps 68:27.

5. See Amos 9:11.

6. See Gen 25:27.

7. See 1 Kgs 8:52.

8. See Mic 5:4.

9. See Isa 59:20.

10. Reference to the Messiah. (see Sanhedrin 98b).

11. See Ezek 34:10, 11.

12. See Isa 51:18.

13. See Lev 26:6; Ezek 34:25.

14. Based on Ezek 34:13.

III

יְנוּסְנָן מִבְּלִי רוּדָה¹ כָּל שׁוֹנְאֵי עִם נִבְדָּל²
וְעָלִינוּ יְהֵא חוּפָה³ כְּמוֹ שׁוֹמֵר עָלֵי אוֹהֶל
וַיִּנְחָה שְׁאֲרִית יוֹסֶף⁴ לְמָקוֹם אֲרוֹן וְהִיכָל
שָׂאוּ זְמֶרָה וְתִנּוּ תוֹף⁵ כְּנוֹר נָעִים עִם גִּבֹּל⁶

וְשִׁמַּחַת עוֹלָם תִּהְיֶה בְּרָאשֵׁינוּ לְדוֹר דּוֹרִים⁷
וּלְפָנֶיךָ נַחֲיָה בְּצִרּוֹר חַיִּים צְרוּרִים⁸
וְצָרִים יִרְדָּפֶם אֱהִיָּה⁹ וַיֵּךְ אוֹתָם בְּסַנְגֻּרִים¹⁰
וַנְּתִיבוֹתָם יִסְלַף וַיִּתְּנוּ בְּכַבֵּל:

סְמִיכָתָם נִפְזֹרֶת וְקָצֶם בְּאַמַּת יִקְרִיב
בַּעַת יִרְאוּ בְּמִשְׁמֶרֶת יִדְעִיָּה עִם יְהוֹיָרִיב¹¹
וּלְוִיָּה חוּזֹרֶת אֲשֶׁר הִגְלָה סִנְחָרִיב
מֵאוֹר עֵינָם יְהֵא דוּלְהָ¹² וַיִּתְּכֶסּוּ לְבוּשׁ אֶבֶל¹³

פְּנִיָּהֶם יִלְבָּשׁוּ בּוֹשֶׁת¹⁴ וְאִין חֲזָרָה לְמַלְכוּתָם
וְאִין אוֹמָה מְבַקֶּשֶׁת לְהַחְזִירָם לְקִדְמוּתָם
וְהַחֲרִיב וְהַקֶּשֶׁת מְבַקֶּעַת בְּנִבְלָתָם
וְתִהְיֶה זֹאת לָהֶם סוּף וַיִּסְפּוּ בְּהֶבֶל:

1. Based on Lev 26:17, 26.

2. See Lev 20:26; Est 3:8.

3. See Deut 33:12.

4. See Amos 5:15.

5. Note the rhyming of *yesepe* with *tef* (Yemenite pronunciation), namely of the vowels *serē* and *hōlām*. These two vowels are treated as identical in Aden and southern parts of Yemen, particularly Sar'ab, our poet's place of birth.

6. The whole verse is taken from Ps 81:3.

7. Based on Isa 35:10; 51:11; 61:7.

8. See 1 Sam 25:29.

9. Reference to God; see Exod 3:14.

10. See Gen 19:11; 2 Kgs 6:18.

11. See 1 Chr 9:10.

12. Based on Job 16:20.

13. Namely, sackcloth; see Jonah 3:8.

14. See Jer 7:19; Ps 35:26 et alt.

IV

וַיִּגְאֹל יוֹנָת אֱלֹם ²	יְשׁוּבָה יִרְחַמְנִי ¹
וּמְנִי אֶל יִתְעַלֵּם ³	וּמִדְּלוֹת יִקְיִמְנִי
וְאֶל אֲבוֹשׁ וְאֶפְלֵם ⁵	בְּיוֹם קָרָאִי יַעֲנֵנִי ⁴
בְּשֵׁם ה' כִּי אֲמִילֵם ⁶	כָּל גּוֹיִם סָבְבוּנִי
עַל חֻקִּים וְדַת הָאֵל	יְהִמָּה כְּאָדָם עֲבָרוֹ ⁷
מִקֵּטָן וְעַד גְּדוֹל ⁸	וַיַּחֲד בַּעֲצָה נִחְבְּרוֹ
לְהַכְחִיד אֶת בְּנֵי רַחֵל	וּלְיוֹם אֶחָד שִׁבְרוֹ ⁹
בַּעֲבוּרַת הַצֶּלֶם:	יִבְקָשׁוּ לְהַסִּיתַנִּי
בְּנִיזָקִים ¹¹ יִהְרָגוּ	סָבְבוּנִי כְּדִבּוּרִים ¹⁰
בְּיָדוֹ יִשְׁתַּרְגֵּנוּ ¹²	וְנִשְׁקַד פֶּשַׁע צָרִים
וְעָלִי יִתְעַנְּנוּ	תַּחַת הַיּוֹתֵם יִקְרִים
וּשְׁכָרִי לֹא יִשְׁוֹלֵם:	וְנוֹטְרָה שְׁמוֹנִי ¹³
וְהוֹצִיאֻנִי רִיקִם	פְּעוּלָתִי כִּכְשׁוֹ
חֲמִדוּהָ תִּהְיֶה חֶלֶק־לָהֶם	וְנִחַלְתִּי יִרְשׁוֹ ¹⁴
וְיִלְבֹּשׁ לְבִי נֶקֶם	וְעוֹד שְׁנִים יִחַדְדְּשׁוּ
וְאֲבִנִי קִרְתָּא יִירוּשָׁלַם:	וְאֲדַרְוְשָׁה אֶת צִאֲנִי ¹⁵

1. See Mic 7:19.

2. The expression יונת אלם, 'Dove on Far-off Terebinths' (see Ps 56:1) refers in Jewish tradition to Israel.

3. Based on Ps 55:2. The poet substitutes uses the objective מני, 'from me' instead of the biblical מתחנתי, 'from my supplication.'

4. See Ps 20:10.

5. See Isa 45:17, et alt.

6. This whole verse is taken from Ps 118:10.

7. Based on Hos 6:7. The poet substitutes the object ברית, 'covenant' with the collocation האל חוקים ודת האל, 'Laws and ordinances of God.'

8. See Gen 19:11, et alt.

9. Like חשבו, See the expression להרע מחשב, 'He who plans to do evil' (Ps 24:8).

10. See Ps 118:12.

11. A highly unusual grammatical and syntactic use of נזק 'harm' or 'injury'. Perhaps one should read בנשקם יהרגו, 'they will be slain with their own weapons,' namely, they will be hoist with their own petard.

12. Based on Lam 1:14.

13. See Cant 1:6.

14. Reference to the Land of Israel. See, Ps 79:1, et alt.

15. See Ezek 34:10, 11.

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